

SEABIRD ISLANDS

No. 260

Soldiers Cap, Lord Howe Group, New South Wales

Location: 31°30'32"S, 159°03'47"E; 190 metres off the north-eastern point of Lord Howe Island, 580 kilometres east of Port Macquarie, New South Wales, in the South Pacific Ocean.

Status: The entire Lord Howe Group is inscribed on the World Heritage List. Soldiers Cap is part of the Permanent Park Preserve administered by the Lord Howe Island Board. Permission from the Board is required to land on the island.

Description: Soldiers Cap (0.8 ha) is the smallest islet of the Lord Howe Group that supports vegetation. It has an elevated area of 2780 square metres and is composed of volcanic tuff dissected by basalt dykes, one of which provides access to the summit. The sloping plateau of 550 square metres reaches an elevation of 44 metres and is dominated by Coast Tussock-grass *Poa poiiformis* with patches of Saltwater Couch *Sporobolus virginicus*. On the northern and western ends of the plateau, clumps of Sallywood *Lagunaria patersonia* survive as low shrubs. Other vegetation, including introduced species (*), comprised:

Carpobrotus glaucescens, *Lepidium howei-insulae*,
**Portulaca oleracea*, *Sesuvium portulacastrum* and
**Sonchus oleraceus*.

Landing: Landing on the southern shore within a sheltering reef is possible in favourable seas. Access to the summit requires a steep, exposed climb up a basalt dyke on the island's

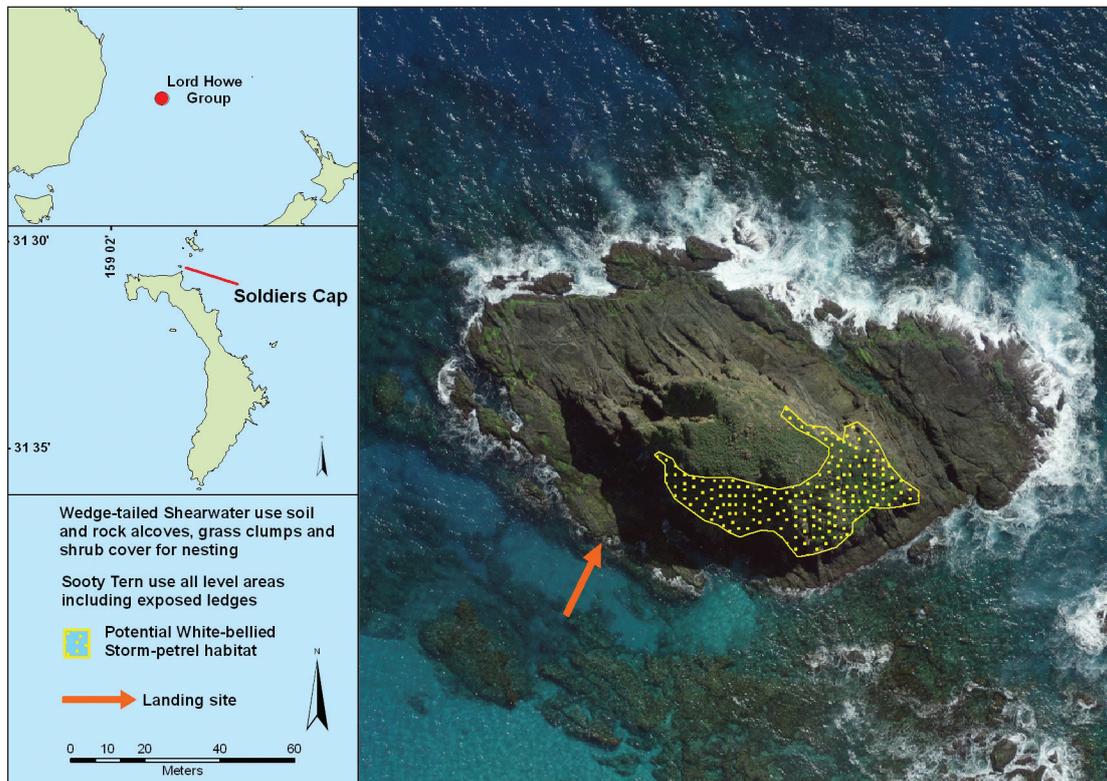
north-western corner followed by a scramble through a thicket of Sallywood on a very steep slope, and is best attempted with a fixed rope.

Ornithological History: The only previous recorded visit was made by Hindwood¹ on 2 November 1936. Carlile led a survey team on three brief visits of up to one hour each on 13 December 2009, 22 February and 20 May 2010.

Breeding Seabirds and Status

Phaethon rubricauda Red-tailed Tropicbird—In February 2010, a single adult was observed from sea level exiting a rock cavity, presumably where it was nesting. This is the only evidence of this species breeding on the island.

Fregetta grallaria White-bellied Storm-petrel—This species is the smallest of the Procellariiformes breeding within the Lord Howe Group and is restricted, by competition for nest sites, to rock cavities that larger shearwaters cannot access. A search of accessible habitat during February 2010 located two adults incubating eggs in rock crevices on the southern perimeter of the plateau. A follow-up survey in May 2010 found the two eggs abandoned, along with a third nearby. This is the first record of White-bellied Storm-petrel nesting on Soldiers Cap. From the limited extent of potential nesting sites it is unlikely that the population exceeds six breeding pairs.



• Soldiers Cap, Lord Howe Group, NSW.



• *Soldiers Cap from the south. Viewed from the Northern Hills of Lord Howe Island.*

Ardenna pacifica Wedge-tailed Shearwater—The skeletal soils on the plateau preclude extensive burrowing, thereby limiting the Wedge-tailed Shearwater to nest in soil alcoves or rock crevices, and under vegetation. In December 2009, a direct count of incubating birds indicated a breeding population of 35 pairs. There is no previous estimate of the numbers of Wedge-tailed Shearwater breeding on Soldiers Cap.

Anous stolidus Common Noddy—This species was nesting in shrubs on the island in December 2009 and February 2010, but the precipitous nesting habitat precluded an accurate assessment of their population size. Based on direct counts and the extent of habitat available we estimated that 10–100 pairs breed on Soldiers Cap.

Procelsterna cerulea Grey Ternlet—Breeding by this species within the Lord Howe Group had concluded before the first survey (December 2009), consequently nesting was not observed. The extent of potential nesting habitat (narrow ledges on steep cliffs) on Soldiers Cap may support up to 10 breeding pairs.

Onychoprion fuscata Sooty Tern—This species nested across the plateau of the island and on some ledges. In December 2009, we counted 85 young, ranging from near-fledged chicks to downy pulli. Assuming each young represented one breeding pair, we estimated the total breeding population of Sooty Tern on Soldiers Cap to be at least 85 pairs. No previous estimate exists for this species on this island.

Factors Affecting Status

Soldiers Cap is close to the main island, and is occasionally visited by residents of Lord Howe Island, but the difficulty of access to the upper slopes makes disturbance of breeding seabirds unlikely. The Buff-banded Rail *Gallirallus philippensis* probably frequents this island from Lord Howe Island, but its activities are likely to be restricted to scavenging abandoned eggs.

Other Seabirds Recorded

No other seabirds were recorded.



• *Soldiers Cap from the east.*

Other Vertebrates Recorded

In contrast to other vegetated islands we visited within the Lord Howe Group^{2,3,4}, we found no reptiles on Soldiers Cap. The absence of reptiles suggests that Ship Rat *Rattus rattus* or House Mouse *Mus musculus* may be present, as both of these mammals occur on nearby Lord Howe Island; however none were detected.

Banding

No banding has been conducted on Soldiers Cap.

Bibliography

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3. Carlile, N. and Priddel, D. (2013). Seabird Islands No. 261: Mutton Bird Island, Lord Howe Group, New South Wales. *Corella* **37**: 94–96.
4. Carlile, N. and Priddel, D. (2013). Seabird Islands No. 257: Tenth of June Island, Lord Howe Group, New South Wales. *Corella* **37**: 86–87.

Acknowledgements

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